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Gender Socialization Practices Among Bisexual and Other Nonmonosexual Mothers: A Longitudinal Qualitative Examination

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ABSTRACT

Though social scientists have researched sexual-minority parenting practices regarding the gender socialization of children, to date this research has focused exclusively on sexual-minority parents in same-gender relationships, and almost exclusively on the experiences of gay and lesbian parents. This article addresses the gender socialization parenting practices of 25 nonmonosexual sexual-minority women who are in different-gender relationships through analysis of qualitative in-depth interviews that took place over the course of 1 year. Our findings indicate that the experiences of these participants differ from both those reported in previous literature on sexual-minority parents in same-gender relationships, as well as heterosexual parents in different-gender relationships. Specifically, participants do not report sexual identity stigma as restricting the degree of cross-gender socialization in which they engage, nor do they report a gender normative influence from their male partners. Findings are discussed in the context of a socioecological framework.

Introduction

The gender socialization of children parented by sexual-minority people has long been an interest of social science researchers (Biblarz & Stacy, 2010; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Such research has largely been comparative, assessing differences and similarities in children's gender socialization across households led by same-gender and different-gender couples (Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). A smaller body of research has focused on the parenting practices that sexual-minority and heterosexual parents engage in to engender their children

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(Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Kane, 2006). However, these cases have focused exclusively on sexual-minority parents who are in same-gender relationships and, with little exception, on parents who are identified by themselves or the researcher as lesbian or gay (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011).

Bisexual and other nonmonosexual (i.e., attracted to more than one sex and/or gender) parents have been largely excluded from parenting research (Ross, Siegel, Dobinson, Epstein, & Steele, 2012). This gap is significant as bisexual people make up the demographic majority of sexual-minority people overall in North America (Copen, Chandra, & Febo-Vazquez, 2016), as well as the majority of sexual-minority people who become parents (US Department of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). Investigating the experiences of bisexual and other nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships may further expand our understanding of the gender socialization practices of both sexual-minority parents and parents in different-gender relationships. Current research on sexual-minority parents' gender socialization practices cannot determine whether findings are associated with participants' sexual-minority identity status, their status of being in a same-gender relationship, or both (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011). Further, research comparing the practices of sexual-minority and heterosexual parents cannot discern whether differences can be attributed to sexual identity or partner gender (Kane, 2006). Research on bisexual and other nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships can begin to tease apart these possibilities.

Existing literature on sexual-minority parents suggests some possible ways these parents' experiences might diverge from those of different-gender-partnered sexual-minority parents. For example, hesitations that sexual-minority parents have reported in diverging from gender norms with their children could be more related to being in a same-gender relationship, as opposed to their sexual-minority status (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011). Openness to diversity in children's gender expression could be associated with sexual-minority status, as opposed to merely being a consequence of violating gender norms through being in a same-gender relationship (Averett, 2016). Inclusion of sexual-minority parents in different-gender relationships may also nuance understanding of the influence of heterosexual fathers on children's gender socialization (Kane, 2006), as it is possible that sexual-minority women partnered with men desire partners who are less heteronormative than do heterosexual women. Finally, as bisexual and nonmonosexual people have largely been excluded from parenting research (Ross & Dobinson, 2013), we currently know little about whether they have unique experiences of parenting practices related to gender socialization. Previous literature indicating that bisexual people, in particular, feel open to diversity in identities (Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010) suggests that they might. We explore these suppositions through the analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with nonmonosexual women in different-gender relationships on parenting and gender socialization.

Bisexual and nonmonosexual erasure

This absence of research on nonmonosexual people is not isolated to the area of sexual-minority parents' engendering of their children. It is reflective of the relative exclusion of nonmonosexual people from parenting research more broadly (Ross & Dobinson, 2013), as well as social science and health research overall (Barker, 2007; Kaestle & Ivory, 2012; Persson & Pfaus, 2015). In society, bisexual erasure occurs through the privileging of monosexual (i.e., attraction to one gender and/or sex) identities and ways of life (Yoshino, 2000), including through assumptions that are made about the sexual identity of an individual on the basis of the gender of his or her partners (Brekhus, 1996). As noted by Averett (2016), the absence of a same-gender coupling in a family with children often leads to that family being read as a heterosexual-parent family. This assumption, in turn, could result in differential treatment of sexual-minority-parent families with different- versus same-gender couples, such as less exposure to forms of sexual-minority stigma that depend upon one's minority identity being known. This logic has been used to justify the exclusion of nonmonosexual parents who are in different-gender relationships from research on the gender socialization of children in sexual-minority-parent families.

However, we cannot assume that being read as heterosexual necessarily results in similar experiences for heterosexual people and sexual-minority people in different-gender relationships. In fact, bisexual and other nonmonosexual people have consistently been found to report significantly different stigma experiences, compared to heterosexual people, such as the hypersexualization of bisexual people (Flanders, Dobinson, & Logie, 2017; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; King et al., 2008). Further, bisexual women in different-gender relationships report different health outcomes, compared to bisexual women in same-gender relationships, including higher levels of depression (Dyar, Feinstein, & London, 2014). An exclusive focus on same-gender-partnered sexual-minority parents, and nearly exclusive focus on gay men and lesbians, in parenting research is problematic, as nonmonosexual people report distinct experiences relevant to parenting, including poorer postpartum mental health (Flanders, Gibson, Goldberg, & Ross, 2016), challenges with sexual identity visibility as parents (Ross et al., 2012), lower socioeconomic status (Gorman, Denney, Dowdy, & Medeiros, 2015), and specific forms of sexual identity-based stigma (Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015).

Sexual-minority parents and gender socialization

Earlier research on the gender socialization of children in same-gender households largely focused on the development of this construct in relation to North American heterosexual and cisgender norms, such as whether children raised by same-gender parents preferred toys that were perceived as aligned with their assigned gender, potentially due to debates about whether parents in same-gender relationships could provide appropriate role models for their children in these domains

(Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). More recently, researchers have investigated parenting practices in relation to the gender socialization of their children in same-gender parent households, both independently (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011) and in comparison to heterosexual, different-gender-parent households (Kane, 2006). The experiences of sexual-minority and heterosexual parents are examined within the binary of parents in same-gender relationships versus different-gender relationships, respectively.

In a qualitative study, Kane (2006) examined parent responses to gender nonconformity in preschool-aged children, both in heterosexual, different-gender-parent families and in gay and lesbian, same-gender-parent families. Kane (2006, pp. 156–7) reported that although many parents accepted gender nonconformity, such as dressing female children in “sports themed clothing,” it was perceived as more acceptable for daughters than sons; heterosexual fathers maintained these boundaries due to a personal investment in normative masculinity. This investment in normative masculinity is one area that might be different for heterosexual men who are partnered with sexual-minority women. It is feasible that if heterosexual men are partnered with someone who is not heterosexual, they may be less invested in heteronormative ideologies. This suggests the importance of disentangling parents’ sexual orientation from their partners’ gender.

In Kane’s (2006) study, gay and lesbian parents reported their children had less freedom for gender and sexuality nonconformity because they already faced stigma from having same-gender parents. Berkowitz and Ryan’s (2011) qualitative study supports this, in that parents (whose children averaged 6 years old) in same-gender relationships felt accountable to heterosexual and cisgender norms, particularly due to fear of exposing their children to further risk through deviating from these norms. Averett’s (2016) qualitative study of parents in same-gender relationships, with children aged 0–10, also reported feeling accountable to these norms. Similar to Kane (2006), participants that expressed this concern was larger for male children, as some worried that the backlash for having same-gender parents would be stronger for male children (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011). Averett (2016) reported that parents with more privilege relative to other participants, due to socioeconomic status or being White, reported a greater capacity to resist normative gender socialization with their children. White, wealthier parents were able to exchange relative greater social capital to deviate from other social norms, which supports the notion that visible minority statuses, such as racial-minority identities, may create barriers to violating other social norms.

Nonmonosexual people in different-gender relationships are often perceived as heterosexual, thus rendering their sexual-minority identity invisible (Brekhus, 1996). Although this invisibility is associated with many issues pertaining to bisexual stigma and negative health outcomes, it also may mean that stigma concerns specific to raising children in same-gender households may not always be personally relevant to nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships. As such,

it is possible nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships feel fewer restrictions fostering gender nonconformity among their children.

This study

To date, research investigating sexual-minority parents' gender-socialization parenting practices has not included sexual-minority parents in different-gender relationships. Based on the literature addressed previously, there are potential differences in the gender socialization practices of such parents, specifically because, despite including at least one sexual-minority parent, these relationships sometimes also include heterosexual fathers, who have unique motivations for normative socialization practices (Kane, 2006; Solebello & Elliott, 2011). Further, it is possible that these families may not have the same concerns about stigma associated with non-normative gender socialization reported by families with a same-gender couple (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011). Our analysis of the gender socialization practices of nonmonosexual mothers in different-gender relationships, therefore, not only expands current understanding of nonmonosexual parenting experiences, but also begins to tease apart sexual-minority status from relationship status as they relate to children's gender socialization.

Method

Design

The data in this article are from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study investigating the perinatal health experiences of sexual-minority cisgender women partnered with cisgender women, sexual-minority cisgender women partnered with cisgender men and trans partners, and heterosexual cisgender women partnered with cisgender men. This was a multisite study, with research teams and data collection occurring in Toronto, Ontario and western Massachusetts. Participants were recruited from these locations as the two sites offered urban and rural settings, access to populations of women who earn low, middle, and high incomes, and because these two locations offer relatively high numbers of sexual-minority women (Goldberg, Ross, Manley, & Mohr, 2017). Although the sites were selected, in part, to provide a greater diversity in economic experience, our sample still includes a greater number of participants with class privilege. Participants engaged in quantitative, online surveys at five different time points over the course of 2 years. In addition to the online survey, sexual-minority participants who were partnered with cisgender men ($n = 28$) and trans partners ($n = 1$) participated in four in-depth qualitative interviews over the course of a year. The data reported in this article are from these interviews.

Participant recruitment

Women were consecutively recruited during the process of attending for prenatal care. We partnered with several midwifery clinics in each site, as prior data

collected by our team show that most sexual-minority mothers access midwifery care, though we also included at least one obstetrician clinic at each site. Participant recruitment began in September, 2013, and continued until February, 2015. We utilized a consecutive sampling approach to minimize volunteer bias and because previous research has found sexual-minority women who are partnered with men are more responsive to this recruitment method than to convenience sampling (Flanders et al., 2016). Each client receiving perinatal care at our recruitment sites received a brief demographic form from their service provider at 25–32 weeks' gestation, which they returned blank if they were not interested in participating, or filled out with information about their sexual identity, sexual history over the past 5 years, and current relationship status. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years of age, currently partnered, and able to speak English. Questionnaires were retrieved from the recruitment sites on a weekly basis. All eligible people who identified as a sexual-minority or whose 5-year sexual histories included at least one woman, and a random selection of eligible heterosexual women, were followed up with by telephone or email, provided with study information, and asked for consent to participate. The 31 sexual-minority participants in different-gender relationships who consented to the quantitative portion of the study were also asked to participate in qualitative interviews, 29 of whom consented.

Sample

The sample included in this article is limited to a subset of those who participated in the qualitative interviews, which is those who identify as a sexual-minority and/or have had a female sexual partner in the last 5 years, and were partnered with a cisgender man at the start of the study. Of the 29 women who were interviewed, three individuals have been excluded as they did not discuss gender socialization with their children, and one individual was excluded as she was partnered with a trans woman and thus did not meet our focused criterion of being partnered with a cisgender man. This results in a final sample of 25 individuals. The average age of participants is 31.73 ($SD = 4.97$). All other demographic information for participants can be found in [Table 1](#).

Data collection

Participants engaged in four semistructured qualitative interviews that took place over the course of a year, including late pregnancy, 3–4 months postpartum, 6–8 months postpartum, and 10–12 months postpartum. Two of the authors and trained psychology graduate students conducted the interviews. The average length of interviews was 75 min, ranging from 45–120 min. The first interview was conducted in person, mostly at each participant's home, though some were conducted at the investigator's office or public venues. The remaining interviews were conducted in person or over the telephone at the

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Variable	n(%)
Country	
United States	14 (56)
Canada	11 (44)
Sexual Identity	
Bisexual	18 (72)
Heterosexual	6 (24)
Queer	1 (4)
Racialization	
Person of Color	4 (16)
White	21 (84)
Highest Level of Education	
High school or less	2 (8)
Some college	3 (12)
Bachelor's degree	7 (28)
Master's degree	9 (36)
Doctoral degree	1 (4)
Other	3 (12)
Income	
< \$10,000	2 (8)
\$10,000–\$19,999	3 (12)
\$20,000–\$29,999	2 (8)
\$30,000–\$39,999	1 (4)
\$40,000–\$59,999	3 (12)
\$60,000–\$79,999	2 (8)
\$80,000–\$99,999	4 (16)
≥ \$100,000	8 (32)

participant's discretion. Most Toronto participants chose in-person interviews, with a greater number of follow-up interviews at the Massachusetts site conducted via telephone, due to the larger geographic range of participants. In four cases, participants' baseline interviews occurred 1–2 weeks after delivery due to early deliveries or scheduling conflicts.

We used a semistructured interview guide that included questions on participants' feelings about the pregnancy/parenting, their sexual history, and whether they felt their history was relevant to their transition to parenthood. Interview guides were flexibly applied; each interview was tailored to focus on questions most relevant to each participant, and follow-up interviews were used to probe areas touched upon in prior interviews. As such, subsequent interview guides were developed and revised in response to emerging findings in the initial interviews. During the process of conducting interviews and reviewing field notes across participants, the first author realized that a number of participants at the Toronto site were volunteering information about their experiences with gender-related parenting practices at the second and third time points. As such, we added a series of probes to the fourth interview guide. These probes were informed by what participants had previously volunteered. They were: “Do you tend to dress your [son/daughter] in stereotypical [boy/girl] clothing?” “Do you tend to give your [son/daughter] toys that are stereotypically associated with [boys/girls]? If so, why? If not, why not?” “How do your parenting choices relate to your own identity? How have people responded to these types of choices?”

Data analysis

We approached data analysis from a constructivist, grounded-theory perspective (Charmaz, 2008), which recognizes that the data analysis process is an interaction between the data and the researcher. We began the analysis process by first extracting the relevant data from the overall transcripts. The first author conducted a search of the qualitative data with a set of terms determined by the team to be relevant to participants' discussions on gender socialization, and then reviewed each transcript to ensure applicable data were not missed. The resulting dataset was then open-coded by three of the authors to establish potential codes to include in the coding framework. After the open coding process, the same three authors collaboratively drafted a coding framework, which was reviewed and revised by the remaining authors. The former three authors then applied the framework to a selection of the data, noting what revisions needed to be made. Once the framework was revised, we engaged in axial coding, applying the coding framework to the entire dataset; each participant was coded by two authors.

When the axial coding was complete, the first author conducted the selective coding in which the data were organized into an identified conceptual structure. She drafted a series of theme memos to detail the overall conceptual structure, as well as each level of the structure. These theme memos were then circulated to the rest of the authors, who suggested various revisions in line with their interpretation of the data. The final product of the analysis is this conceptual model, detailed in the results section.

Although analysis predominantly focuses on the gender socialization of children up to 12 months of age, we also address parents' description of the gender socialization experiences of older children in cases where participants had another child prior to participation in the study. Because our focus is on children who are too young to express identification with a particular gender, we use the terminology of assigned gender throughout the remainder of the article to recognize that although socially they have been assigned a particular gender, it may not reflect how they later identify.

Results

Through our qualitative analysis, we identified that the data fit a socioecological conceptual framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which children's genders and gender socialization are actively constructed with influences from the micro (i.e., participant) level, the meso (i.e., participants' interpersonal relationships) level, and the macro (i.e., social norms and beliefs) level. The socioecological model has been a useful tool in mapping the experiences of nonmonosexual people (Flanders, Robinson, Legge, & Tarasoff, 2016; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010).

At the center of our analysis are the ways in which participants' children are socialized in relation to gender. These processes are influenced at the micro level through participants' parenting practices regarding same-gender socialization

(gendering aligned with a child's assigned gender), cross-gender socialization (gendering aligned with a gender other than a child's assigned gender), and femme erasure, or the privileging of masculinity for all children to the point of derogating or erasing femininity. Gender socialization is also affected at the micro level due to participants' motivations for their parenting practices, at the meso level from participants' friends, partners, and family, and at the macro level by social norms and beliefs such as gender role stereotypes. The conceptual model is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Micro level

Same-gender parenting practices

Almost all of the participants discussed engaging in gendered parenting practices that aligned with their child's assigned gender. When these discussions were had in relation to infants (as opposed to older children the participants were also parenting), the conversation largely centered on clothing and toys, which is reflected

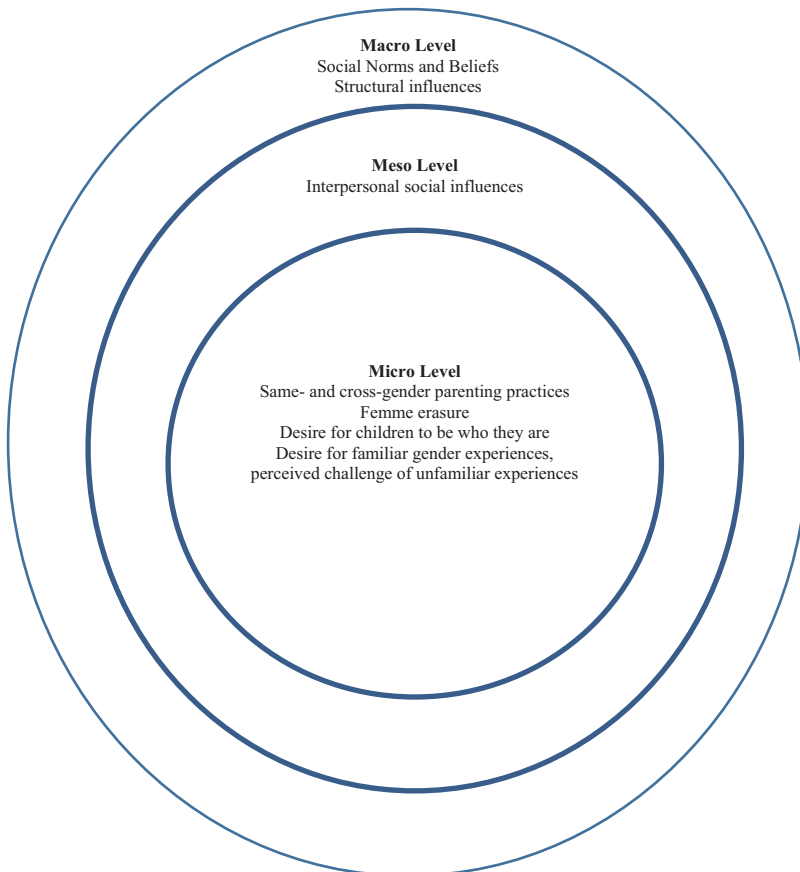


Figure 1. The socioecological model of gender socialization, in which children's gender socialization is developed in the context of spheres of influence.

in the development of the interview guide. For example, Brooke (22, bisexual, Latina and White, US) stated:

[W]e dress him in boys' clothes ... yeah everything is boys. And you can tell it's boys. There are all these options, there are boys' clothes that are colored purple. And I'm fine but if I put purple on my kid they're going to really think he's a girl [laughs].

Brooke went on to explain that she would not mind if people thought her child was female, as he was just a baby, but that she would still correct individuals.

Some participants also reported that they engaged in gender socialization through language. For example, Chantal (33, bisexual, White, Canada) discussed how she felt she was reinforcing stereotypes about masculinity through the things she said to her child: "It's so hard 'cause you realize how many things are indoctrinated into you. And, like, things you say to a little boy, like 'Oh look at you; you're so tough!' And, like, why am I saying that to him?"

In contrast to some parents, who felt positively or neutral about their same-gendered parenting practices, others, like Chantal, felt negatively in that they perceived themselves to be reinforcing socialized gender norms. For example, Chantal was critical of her tendency to reinforce gender norms through language, and hoped to limit that parenting practice in the future.

Same- and cross-gender parenting practices

The majority of participants explicitly discussed ways in which they allowed both same- and cross-gender socialization, or overtly provided various opportunities for diverse gender expression. Participants discussed this approach to gender parenting practices for both male- and female-assigned children. However, the degree to which participants engaged in this practice varied from person to person, as well as between participants who described this practice with assigned-female children versus assigned-male children. Some individuals saw themselves as predominantly gendering their children in line with their child's assigned gender, while providing limited openness toward cross-gender practices, such as Donna (37, bisexual, White, US) who discussed how she dressed her female-assigned child:

Some of both [stereotypically boy and girl clothing], but I think a little more girly than I had expected to. She definitely wears probably like ninety percent girl clothes ... uhh, I'll go with eighty-five percent girl clothes, ten percent gender neutral, and five percent boy clothes. And I expected it to be more, mostly gender neutral with a couple of girly things thrown in (laughs).

Donna went on to say that her tendency to dress her child in feminine clothing stemmed from receiving hand-me-downs that were feminine-typed, and because she felt it was less "awkward" to interact with people about her child when her child's assigned gender was clearly communicated through clothing.

Other participants viewed themselves as engaging in a more equal proportion of same- and cross-gender parenting practices. Louisa (31, bisexual, White, Canada)

expressed that she felt all babies were “gender neutral,” and as such shopped for clothing based on fit as opposed to gender for her male-assigned child. Similarly, Lisa (31, bisexual, White, US) discussed balancing feminine and masculine activities and clothing with her older female-assigned child:

You know, but she loves dolls and she likes pink fairies and she loves going out and playing in the mud and doing things that are a little bit more on the masculine side. We just try to encourage a balance of all of that. Go out and play soccer, do whatever you can, but also be okay with playing with dolls, because that’s fine, too. They’re all good.

A number of participants expressed a limit to which they would gender their assigned-male children in overtly feminine ways; this restriction was not expressed for overt masculine gendering with assigned-female children. Some individuals reported they were fine with dressing their assigned-male child in feminine clothing, as long as it was not a dress, whereas similar restrictions of cross-gender practice were not emphasized for assigned-female children. Parents’ narratives suggest that masculine gendering of their male-assigned children was an implicit (even natural) default, and while in contrast, feminine gendering was seen as “imposing” something on boys. As Kim (28, bisexual, White, US) noted, “He can’t exactly pick out his own clothes right now but I’m not going to force something on him. He is my baby boy right now so he is going to be a baby boy.” Likewise, Tiffany (38, bisexual, White, US) asserted, “I wouldn’t put him in a dress or in clothes that were obviously girly, because I feel like that would be me imposing that on him. But, as he gets older, if he wanted to do that, I wouldn’t care.”

Femme erasure

One potential explanation for the restriction of femininity among male-assigned children and the acceptance of masculinity among female-assigned children is the occurrence of *femme erasure*. *Femme* is a term that originated from queer women’s communities to describe a range of feminine gender identities and expressions. *Femme erasure* then is the systemic devaluing and invisibilizing of feminine gender identities, expressions, and people. Some participants positioned their resistance to femininity, particularly pink clothing and toys, for their female-assigned children in the context of a feminist perspective. Taylor (33, bisexual, White, Canada) discussed feminist parenting and gender socialization with her older daughter:

I’ve been like saying lately that I’m like a failure as a feminist mother ‘cause my daughter, like [child]’s like really into *Frozen* ... and she’s like, “I want to be a princess when I grow up.” Like, “well you can’t be a princess; princess isn’t a job, plus it would be really boring.”

Interestingly, Taylor evolved to a different perspective of femininity throughout the year, and reported how recognizing *femme erasure* changed her perspective on feminist parenting, encouraging the celebration of femininity. Renata (33, bisexual, White, Canada) also critiqued the double standard apparent in cross-gender socialization practices between male- and female-assigned children, stating that the

focus on “gender neutrality” was actually femme erasure, an opinion that she developed through becoming a parent:

Now as a parent I decided that actually like there’s no such thing as gender neutrality, like that gender neutrality is just feminine erasure. ... [Partner] only puts her in blue and green and, and brown and camo, but if we had a boy he wouldn’t have her in dresses and tutus. ... If she was you know, a boy, she’d maybe have like two pink t-shirts and we would occasionally rotate to be provocative you know?

In addition to indicating that femme erasure may play a part in the celebration of masculine gendering for female-assigned children and the restriction of feminine gendering for male-assigned children, Renata and Taylor’s changing perspectives on gender socialization demonstrate that gender socialization is interactive—while participants are influencing the gender socialization of their children, the act of parenting potentially also influences their own socialization in relation to gender.

Desire for children to be who they are

Participants described a desire for their children to grow up to be who they are, which informed their approach to gender socialization. Some wanted their children to have exposure to the many different options available in relation to gender. For instance, Diana (32, queer, White, Canada) said, “I would make sure she has like lots of options that aren’t like, so feminine looking so that she has an option to be who she is...” Similarly, Chantal (33, bisexual, White, Canada) expressed not wanting to “indoctrinate” her child with masculine gender norms so that he could be whom he wanted. Other participants also reported a desire for their children to have freedom in who they are, such as Donna (37, bisexual, White, US), who said, “We want to give her freedom to, you know, be herself and not feel like she has to do something because she’s a girl, or she has to do something because it’s what girls do, or anything like that.”

The desire for children to have the opportunity to be who they are extended to gender identity. For example, Kim (28, bisexual, White, US) stated, “He’s my baby boy and whatever—if he wants to grow up to be a girl or something, I’m not going to tell him no. He can grow up however he is comfortable and happy.” Because many of the participants described offering multiple gender socialization experiences, this indicates that for children to “be who they are” they need exposure to many choices to ultimately be able to select from those options as to how they want to identify and express their gender.

Many participants linked their desire for their children to be who they are to their own identities and personal histories. For instance, people who reported more restrictive upbringings in relation to gender and sexuality discussed how this influenced their desire for their children to have more freedom. Holly (24, bisexual, Latina, US) discussed being “forced into the cookie cutter mold of a little girl” and did not want to give her child the same experience. When asked about whether

they felt their sexual identity and/or history influenced their approach to parenting, a number of individuals responded that they believed they were more open-minded about who their children could grow up to be in relation to gender and sexuality. Carolyn (38, heterosexual, White, US) related her sexual history and her connection to a sexually diverse community to her openness regarding gender and sexuality, whereas Tiffany (38, bisexual, White, US) reported that she wants her children to be who they are, because she expects the same freedom for herself and her own identities:

So I think I try really hard to let the kids be who they are, whether it's about gender or any other part of their identity, and I guess that's what's important to me and how it relates to my identity, is that I want the freedom and the latitude to be who I, to be authentic to myself and so I want that for my kids too.

Desire for familiar gender experiences, perceived challenge of unfamiliar experiences

A number of participants also expressed that some of their gendered parenting practices were related to their desire to foster gender experiences that were similar or familiar to their own. This translated both into specific forms of gender expression, such as dressing assigned-female children in feminine clothing, as well as broader gender role socialization. This theme differs from the aforementioned in that there is less of a focus on providing many potential options for gender socialization, and more of a focus on providing the options that the participants were most familiar with or interested in, based on their own experiences of gender socialization. Renata (33, bisexual, White, Canada) discussed how her clothing preferences for her daughter related to her own preferences:

I think a lot of it is that, honestly, parents want their kids to be like them, and so the clothes that I get excited about, um, which are traditionally femme-y clothing, um, I get excited about her wearing too.

Other individuals discussed ways in which they anticipated difference in experience (i.e., between themselves and their children) to be a potential challenge. Carolyn (38, heterosexual, White, US) expressed concern that her male-assigned child might grow up embody a type of masculinity she was unfamiliar with, stating, "If he grows up to be a super bro-y jock kind of person, that's going to be harder for me in some ways. . . . I think that's going to be difficult for me." Suzanne (44, bisexual, White, Canada) expressed that she did not necessarily desire her child to have a similar experience related to gender and sexuality as herself, but rather felt that if that did end up being the case, she would be able to be a supportive resource for her, stating that if her female-assigned child later was "attracted to women" she would be able to be "supportive and wanting her to know that that's a possibility and more than valid." This was in direct contrast to her experiences with her older male-assigned child, where she expressed she could not have the same shared experiences with him.

Some participants also discussed tension between wanting their children to be who they are, while at the same time ensuring their gender socialization experiences were consistent enough with mainstream culture that their children were not completely unfamiliar with it. For example, Donna (37, bisexual, White, US) expressed, “I think in a lot of ways we sort of, you know, my husband and I were talking about how we definitely want to give her enough of a sense of mainstream society that she’s not, sort of shocked when she runs into it,” whereas Verin (35, bisexual, White, Canada) reported concern over her children feeling isolated from mainstream society due to having a very different gender socialization experience. This was more salient for participants around the experiences of male-assigned children. Renata (33, bisexual, White, Canada) expressed concern for stigmatization when speculating what it would be like if she had a male-assigned child:

It is way more complicated [having a boy], and there’s, there’s, I think there’s much broader safety issues too, because, like, you know, you send your little boy to daycare, you know, and introduce him to girl clothes, I think you’re running a risk that they’re gonna get picked on, they’re gonna get judged by other parents, and that they’re not gonna get cared for as well by discriminatory staff.

Meso level: Interpersonal social influences

In addition to participants’ own gender socialization practices, many discussed how others in their immediate social lives also affected their child’s gender socialization. Although these individuals included participants’ partners, their wider families, and friends, we focus here on partners.

All of the participants in our sample were partnered with men for the duration of the study. Of these, only one individual described an encounter in which her partner reinforced normative gender socialization with their child, in which he cut his male-assigned child’s long hair so the child would not look like a “girl.” The remaining participants reported that their partners were not more invested in pressuring their children into normative gender socialization than they were themselves, and were equally open-minded about gender expression. Participants reported their partners wanted to avoid reinforcing gendered stereotypes both for their children and within their partnerships. For example, Marina (31, heterosexual, Latina and White, US) discussed the conversations she and her partner had around socializing their female-assigned child to not feel as though girls are “bad” at science and technology; Lisa (31, bisexual, White, US) stated about her older child:

[Partner] especially thinks it’s important for her to understand that she’s battling all of these gender binary issues that all of these kids get in preschool. Like, “I love pink and I don’t want to wear jeans because I don’t want to look like a boy.”

Diana (32, queer, White, Canada) expressed that her partner felt it was important for their female-assigned child to see him doing domestic labor: “We talked about it before [child] was born that it’s really important for him that he, she sees him clean. ... He really wants her to know that that isn’t women’s work.”

In these instances, participants describe how they are actively working with their partners to make choices around what gender socialization processes they want to encourage or resist with their children.

Beyond resistance to gendered stereotypes, a number of participants also reported having conversations with their partner about nonbinary gender identities. For example, Lisa described how her partner wanted their child to be sensitive to the fact that some people are trans. In addition, participants discussed with their partners an openness to their children potentially identifying as trans. Diana related discussions she had with her partner about the possibility of their children being trans:

I said ... “Are you prepared for the possibility that [child] might be trans?” ... He’s like, “Well I think, yeah, it’s fine if she feels like, if she feels like she’s trans, we’ll support her all of the best ways that we can.” ... And I thought like, that is kind of the best answer that I could expect. ... I felt like, although I married a man, I just like married the queerest, the queerest of, of heterosexual men that I could find.

Conversations like this position gender as something not fixed or innate, but rather as a construct that their children may actively choose to identify with in one way or another.

Macro level: Social norms and beliefs

Structural issues linked to gender, including social norms and beliefs, relate to the gender socialization of children at every level. Implicit throughout this article is the notion that there are social categories of *male* and *female*, as well as *femininity* and *masculinity*. However, it is evident these are not necessarily seen by participants as essential, stable constructs but, rather, categories that are socially constructed, produced, and reproduced through social interaction across of each of our levels of analysis. Further, in line with Scott’s (1987) work in feminist history, these social constructs only exist in relation to one another, in that what it is to be male or masculine can only be understood in relation to what it is to be female or feminine. As such, larger social constructs inform people of what *maleness* and *femaleness* are in relation to one another, and these ideas are reproduced through relationships and through participants’ individual parenting choices. The choices participants make regarding the gendering of their children, and the influence of their social relationships, are defined, guided, and constrained by social norms of masculinity and femininity.

Structural influences

Structural influences related to individual choices regarding parenting practices and directly to gender socialization of children. In reference to individual choices, social norms influence both how participants communicate that they have definite ideas of what is masculine and feminine clothing and behavior, and norms reinforce masculine and feminine categories, such as through gender-segregated areas

for clothing in stores. For example, Heidi (35, bisexual, South Asian, Canada) discussed how “boys” and “girls” clothing were clearly demarcated, and that her choices for her child’s clothing are restricted based on what is available in the “boy’s” section of a store:

You know [child], his favorite color is pink, um. It often changes, but when he picks a cup, he picks a plate, it’s often he picks the pink one, and I was just thinking the other day, “You know what; he doesn’t have any pink clothes,” and uh, and so I was looking the other day at the stores, and it’s really hard to find pink clothes for boys.

It is interesting that although Heidi could decide to shop in both sections, as other participants reported doing, there appears to be a strong social influence to adhere to gender norms in this context. Further, other participants associated access to “gender neutral” clothing with higher income, such as Chantal (33, bisexual, White, Canada), who stated that it was difficult to find clothing that was not masculine or feminine gendered in second-hand stores.

A number of participants also discussed ways in which they saw environmental factors, such as media or school programming, would influence the gender socialization of their children. For example, Renee (36, bisexual, White, US) critiqued how masculinity was portrayed through media, noting that a recent film “really annoyed” her:

Like, [there’s] the main character is this guy that acts like a dick, basically, and that he’s sort of the hero of the movie is like, this guy who, you know, bangs a lot of chicks and it’s like this typical teenage boy mentality kind of thing. At the start of the movie, you meet him as this little boy and he’s like this really sensitive boy who loves his mother and who, like, doesn’t want to kill animals and, like, gets in fights with kids because the kids are hurting animals, and then, like, the next scene you see him kicking lizards. ... That’s what’s wrong with how we expect our boys to act.

Alma (27, heterosexual, White, Canada) also discussed concerns of how the social environment her child would be in could influence her gender socialization:

I was listening to a show on CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] about [princess phases], and, like, all the parents that called in were, like, their daughters were not interested at all, until they went to school, and it was, like, oh my god, there’s the socialization right there. They don’t have to be exposed to Disney movies; they’re exposed to all the kids that are exposed to all the Disney movies.

In these instances, participants viewed the gender socialization of their children as developed not only from the parenting practices they choose to engage in, but also from direct environmental influence.

Discussion

Our findings provide an alternate perspective from previous literature on the gender socialization parenting practices, nuanced understanding of how gender socialization parenting practices relate to parent sexual-minority status and relationship

status, and identify practices that are potentially specific to the intersection of both nonmonosexual identity and different-gender relationship status among cisgender parents. Although previous research on gender socialization parenting practices of sexual-minority parents has utilized theoretical frameworks such as the interactionist approach (Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Kane, 2006), or intersectionality and queer sociological analysis (Averett, 2016), we applied a socioecological framework to the data, which allows for an explicit analysis of how gender socialization is cultivated through micro, meso, and macro level influences. Further, the longitudinal nature of the study enabled us to observe when participants' understanding of gender socialization changed through their experiences of parenthood and other social influences like feminist media, which in turn affected their parenting practices. It is important to note that the discussions of these practices are limited due to the demographic make-up of the participants in this study, in that we are speaking about sexual-minority mothers who are predominantly White, have accessed formal higher education, and whose family annual income is \$60,000 or higher. These characteristics likely impact our findings, as race, culture, and class interact with gender roles, stereotypes, and expectations.

Similar to previous research on parenting practices of sexual-minority people (Averett, 2016), the participants in our study generally expressed openness to deviating from gender norms in the socialization of their children by providing both same- and cross-gender opportunities, as well as in being open to the potential their children would identify as trans. In some instances, participants attributed this openness to their sexual identity in particular, as they wanted their children to have the same freedom from social norms that they wanted for themselves. This echoes prior work showing that among bisexuals, one positive aspect of being bisexual is being more open to diversity (Rostosky et al., 2010), and that some bisexual individuals emphasize the role of freedom in their sexual identity, in that they are not bound by the same social norms or gender restrictions for attraction and relationships (Flanders, LeBreton, Robinson, Bian, & Caravaca-Morera, 2017). This valuing of freedom may also be affected by the racial and class privilege of the majority of our participants, however, as many of the participants' likely did not perceive their children as needing to navigate multiple marginalized identities as they grew up, such as identifying as a sexual-minority person of color, and/or living in poverty. Some researchers have documented how the intersection of multiple marginalized identities makes it more difficult, for example, for some youth to be out as a sexual-minority person (e.g., Ghabrial, 2017).

It is also important to emphasize that not all of our participants identified as bisexual, but, rather, some identified as heterosexual while reporting a history of same-sex sexual behavior and/or relationships. As such, the openness toward gender socialization practices is not only limited to participants who actively identify with a sexual-minority label, but also extends to those who do not. This is important as it extends our current understanding of parenting practices of sexual-

minority parents to those who are invisibilized because of relationship status, sexual identity label, or both.

Some participants did express feeling restricted in the level of feminine gendering they could or wanted to engage in with male-assigned children. Though Averett (2016) and Berkowitz and Ryan (2011) also found sexual-minority parents were more concerned about cross-gender socialization for male children relative to female children, this was attributed to the concern that male children were more vulnerable to stigma from having same-gender parents. In contrast, participants in our study did not attribute their concern for male-assigned children to sexual-minority status, potentially due to their invisibility as sexual-minority parents. The restriction of femininity for male-assigned children aligns with theorization on hierarchies of gender (as suggested by Kane, 2006), in which violating socially dominant masculinity norms, defined in relation to femininity norms, can lead to experience of social oppression (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Based on our findings, fear of oppression for male-assigned children violating masculine gender norms exists for sexual-minority parents even if their sexual-minority status is not readily visible. The participants in our study also explicitly brought attention to ways in which femme erasure restricts feminine expression in male-assigned children while simultaneously celebrating masculine expression in female-assigned children. This analysis brings a different perspective to double standards in the gender socialization of children that highlights femininity as opposed to a primary focus on masculinity. Further, given that dominant masculinity norms are often linked to Whiteness and financial independence (Wong, Ho, Wang, & Miller, 2017), it is possible that a more racially and economically diverse sample may have interacted with femme erasure in a different way. If a parent knew their male-assigned child would experience marginalization based on race and/or class, engaging in feminine gender socialization could possibly be seen as even riskier than participants felt in this sample. Conversely, some behavioral practices that are deemed as feminine by White, middle-class norms (e.g., dancing, attention to physical appearance and dress) are seen as masculine among other racial groups, such as within Latino communities (Ocampo, 2012). Thus, the content of femme erasure could differ across racial groups.

Our findings also do not align with Kane's (2006) report on the normative influence of heterosexual fathers, though our data are limited in that we only have participant reports of their partners' actions and did not interview fathers directly, as did Kane. Participants reported that they did not perceive their partners as engaging frequently in gender normative behavior with their children. Potentially, this could mean that the fathers did, indeed, engage in less gender normative behavior, and this could speak to differences between the men that our participants chose to partner with in contrast to the heterosexual male partners of participants in Kane's (2006) research. It is possible that women with diverse sexual histories are more likely to partner with men who have less normative views of gender and sexuality, or alternatively, that their social circles, in general, include individuals who have

less normative views. This is consistent with research demonstrating that people are likely to spend time with others who are socially similar (Lozares et al., 2014), and, as such, are more likely to meet potential partners that are similar to them. For example, some of our participants reported meeting their heterosexual male partners through feminist or anarchist groups to which they belonged.

However, a significant limitation to these postulations are that we did not directly interview fathers and, therefore, our interpretations are limited to how our participants perceived and discussed the behavior of their male partners. It is possible that the fathers described in this study did not engage in any less gender normative behavior, but, rather, participants' reports simply focused less on normative behaviors, or sexual-minority women describe their male partners' behavior in ways that are different from how heterosexual men describe their own behavior. Or, given a broader acceptance of non-normative gender socialization in queer communities, it is possible that participants felt pressured to not report their partners' behavior that they viewed as conforming more to normative gendering. However, not all of our participants felt as though they were a member of a queer community, nor identified with a sexual-minority label, which may limit the application of this interpretation.

Finally, there may be something particular about the experiences of nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships that is unique to the intersection of those statuses. Specifically, it may be that this intersection of identity and partner status results in differences related to gender socialization that are not merely additive of the experiences of sexual-minority parents in same-gender relationships and heterosexual parents in different-gender relationships, but, rather, the gender socialization parenting experience may be particular to nonmonosexual parents in different-gender relationships. This is supported by the combined findings of fewer worries about stigma and possible differences in meso level factors associated with participants' male partners, and is a strength of our inclusive sampling that enabled us to include narratives of sexual-minority mothers who would ordinarily not be included in a study on sexual-minority parenting. Participants' lack of reported worries about stigma is also possibly related to the racial and class privilege for the majority of the sample.

Limitations and future directions

Though this article contributes information to an understudied topic, there are limitations. First, as the parent project did not originally intend to explicitly study the gender socialization parenting practices of participants, and as the questions about these practices were added after they emerged in interviews with participants, we did not address gender socialization parenting practices at each time point for all participants. This limits the longitudinal perspective for many of the participants. Further, as we did not interview fathers, the level in which we can compare our findings to that of previous work on the influence of heterosexual

fathers on the gender socialization of children is limited to how our participants described their male partners' actions. Future research should include interviews with male partners of sexual-minority women to better explore similarities and differences to previous literature.

Conclusion

The goals of this article were to fill a gap in knowledge on the parenting experiences of nonmonosexual people, with a particular focus on gender socialization parenting practices, and to expand on current understanding of how gender socialization occurs in both sexual-minority parent and different-gender couple families. Our primary findings are that, in general, our participants were open to a wide variety of gender socialization practices for their children, and at times attributed this openness explicitly to their sexual identity or sexual history. Similar to past research, some participants did express feeling restricted in how much cross-gender socialization they were able to engage in with assigned-male children. However, participants did not link this restriction to concern over stigma of their child having a sexual-minority parent (as has been cited in previous research), likely due to the invisibility of their sexual-minority status. Thus, there may be experiences related to gender socialization parenting practices that are unique to people who embody the intersection of sexual minority status and being in a different-gender relationship.

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